Where Mercy Leads

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Phil Newman

> ***When everything that could be shaken was shaken, Rich Mullins ended up straddling the New Mexico border, quotin' Deuteronomy to the Navajos.***

Folks who've heard even a sampling of Rich Mullins' music know he likes to sing about places - from the tall trees down at Johnson's Creek, to the winter wheat of Ireland, to the moonlight spilling them cold Dakota hills.

Rich's affinity for describing his surroundings in song springs from numerous travels and an ability to let his senses lead him to the next poignant lyric. Come to think of it, he says, spending time at "home" - which was Wichita, Kansas, until a few months ago, when he loaded up the truck and moved to New Mexico - feels like being on vacation.

"Wichita was more like a home," he admits, "but I think that's because I was in college, and you never assume that you're gonna live in the same town that you go to college in. Someone told me, 'You seem to have this real sense of detachment.' It's just that I don't get the opportunity to get very attached. But I'm really affected by wherever I'm at."

One summer Sunday, we caught up with Rich in a place that definitely has affected him, a place he doesn't get to visit as much as he once did: Bethel Methodist Church, a weathered clapboard structure not far from Johnson's Creek and just down the road from the house Rich still owns in Bellsburg, Tennessee, 30 miles outside Nashville.

The sanctuary holds almost sacred significance for Rich. Over the years, the author of 'Sing Your Praise To The Lord' and 'Awesome God' has walked to the church alone to craft songs at its piano or to rest in its rickety

wooden pews and silently reflect on life.

On this particular afternoon, however, the old worship house and its yard were filled with the voices of friends gathered to celebrate tow beginnings: the birth a year earlier of Aidan Strasser, the son of Rich's longtime friend and co-writer, Beaker; and the hatching of a new chapter in Rich's own life. After years of dreaming and planning, he had earned his music-education degree from Friends University in May and had relocated to a tiny town on the Navajo reservation in New Mexico where he plans to teach music to Native American children.

Among the revelers assembled in Bellsburg that day were three members of Rich's Ragamuffin band - Phil Madeira, Lee Lundgren, and Mark Robertson - and one of Rich's newer pals, Mark Lowry, who cracked everyone up without saying a word simply by puttering up on his road-hoggin', bad-boy motorscooter.

Another purpose of the party was to toast the upcoming release of Rich's latest album, Brother's Keeper, the Indiana-bred crooner's first "self-produced" effort. (He got help from 'muffins Jimmy A., Rick Elias, Aaron Smith, Madeira, and Lundgren.) Rich and band, along with fellow Reunion artists Ashley Cleveland and Carolyn Arends, will hit the road this fall for a 65-stop tour.

As the sun began to set, a few party-goers got misty-eyed talking about their friend Rich moving even farther away from his old Nashville stomping grounds. Rich, on the other hand, seemed largely unaffected, chowing gleefully on barbecue and birthday cake and engaging in a spirited theological discussion with Mr. Lowry. (They eventually called a truce and went for a spin together on the Markmobile.)

"Every time I go back to my old house in Bellsburg, I really wish I could go there for a week," Rich did acknowledge later, "because there are so many people I'd just like to sit down with and say 'hi' to.

"At the same time, I think I am a little peculiar in that I never miss people until a week before I'm going to see them. Friends will say they're coming out to visit, and I'll say, 'Cool.' As the time approaches, I get anxious to see them, and when they finally get there I'm excited."

His east-of-the-Mississippi friends will have to work at it a bit more, but you

can bet they'll find ways to visit Rich in his new locale. The motivation for his move, he says, was a desire to extend the love of Christ to a culture outside mainstream America. "Growing up as a kid I had a real romantic fascination with Indians," he says, "but for me the things is, here's a culture that is right here. It would be much harder for me at this time to move to Asia. So I can have that kind of experience without having to leave the United States."

Native Americans have been "largely overlooked by the church," he contends. "Although there have been a lot of mission efforts on the reservation, I think the concern was more to civilize them than to Christianize them. The idea was to get them to live in square house and wear ties and conform to a cultural bias rather than a revealed truth."

In his new role, Rich considers himself to be joining God's established work. "I generally think that anyone who thinks they're doing something for God is probably delusional," he says with characteristic candor. "If I want to do God a favor, I should just live as fully as I can, and allow Him to enjoy the gift that He's given me."

There's another, more personal reason for Rich's move. It also explains why he decided to return to college in his mid-30s. And it's one of the reasons he chose to self-produce Brother's Keeper rather than collaborate with his longtime producer, Reed Arvin.

Rich says he is begging God to stretch him beyond his boundaries, be they musical, spiritual, or cultural. "You come back to saying, 'What is essential Christianity? What does faithfulness to Christ really involve? When does it require me to set aside my biases, and when does it require me to stand by them?'"

As Rich recalls, he began laying the groundwork for his move to the Navajo reservation when he recorded Winds of Heaven ... Stuff of Earth back in 1988, which was about the time he started hungering to share God's love with other cultures. He admits that the future of his recording career is undetermined. "We've done six albums since I really started wanting to get involved in mission work. And music has given me the opportunity to prepare myself to do that. I was able to go back to school, which a lot of people my age wouldn't have been able to do."

Still, lest anyone fret that Rich might stop waxing poetic about all the

pictures he sees in the sky and on the earth, the creative juices continue to flow in his new southwestern home. "I've already been inspired," he says thoughtfully. "It's a very inspiring place."

Even if the cactuses don't grow as tall as the trees down at Johnson's Creek.

Rich's Mullings

Hide his opinions under a bushel? No! The Richmeister has given us lots of quotable quips over the years, from the personal ("Being single's great, except between about 10 and 2 every night") to the political ("Clinton's no more a clown than anyone else who's ever been in there") to the ponderable ("We are the temple of God; it's about people, not buildings"). Here he goes again:

***On his 65-stop fall tour with Ashley Cleveland and Carolyn Arends**: "I'm excited about the tour for maybe three reasons. One, I love the music on the album, and of course we'll be doing a lot of that music. Two, I have a blast with the Ragamuffins. Three, you write these songs because of people, and when you get to play then live, you get to have contact with people, the big motivation behind why you're doing what you're doing."*

***On why he still sings about God's mercy so much**: "I just think I believe it more deeply now than ever before. I have days when I go, 'I'm lucky to be alive.'"*

***On his spartan lifestyle (he's currently living in a trailer)**: "My experiences with things have always been disappointing. Nothing has ever been worth what it cost. It doesn't mean I never buy anything, it just means I recognize at the outset that this is a bad investment." He grins. "I do like my jeep an awful lot."*

***On the Ragamuffins**: "I wanted to be part of a band. Growing up I was excluded so much, 'cause I was never an athlete, so I think sometimes I overcompensate now. It's fun to be an accepted part of a team that's making a contribution."*

***On living single in a sex-obsessed society**: "I think the big reason why a*

lot of people become sexually active is because they think they're gonna get something besides just sex out of it. And the reality is all you do get is just sex. And you think, "Oh, this will make someone really love me ... if I remain pure I might lose my boyfriend or my girlfriend." Well the deal is, you might lose them anyway. When you compromise your faith, when you disobey what is clearly lined up for us in terms of values, you have compromised who you are."

***On his disillusionment with politics**: "You cannot change people by changing their laws. Like Plato said, 'Let me make their music and I don't care who makes their laws.' Music is more powerful than legislation."*

***On his secret desire to perform at the White House**: "I've sometimes thought, "Am I such an egomaniac that I would actually go there and play for on of these guys?" And I'm sure I would. But I also think that it would be really wrong. But of all the wrong things I've done I'm not sure it would be any worse that any of the others."*

***On the human tendency to debate everything**: "I don't know how to have an opinion without being passionately about it, even if it's just an opinion I assume for the sake of argument. I find that the people I don't really care that much about I argue with, and the people I really love, I pray for. So I think if I would pray more and argue less, I would have done better."*

***On the difference between Generation X's and his own Baby Boomer generation's attitudes towards pop culture**: "Rather than trying to get their identity entirely from a pop movement, X'ers enjoy it, exploit it, they get out of it exactly what they pay for, and then they leave it alone. I think when I was kid, we really believed that pop culture was going to have some kind of enduring legacy. And it does: We've got AIDS now."*

***On his healthy appetite**: "After two hours of dead silence in the jeep, (Rich's pal) Mitch looks over and goes, 'Do you think you could eat a 72-ounce steak in an hour?' I go, 'Sure, I could eat a 72-ounce steak in about 20 minutes.'"*

He's not kidding - we've seen Rich eat. - P.N.

This One's a Keeper, Brother

Over lunch at Mulligan's in downtown Nashville, Rich ruminates on his latest project, song by song.

"Brother's Keeper"

When he and Beaker wrote it, Rich was staying with author James Bryan Smith and Smith's wife, Megan. Jim was working on a book called Embracing the Love of God," Rich recalls, "and so a lot of our conversations were about how you allow yourself to experience God's love and how you love someone the same way." As for one of the song's most thoughtful lyrics - "I won't despise him for his weakness, I won't regard him for his strength" - Rich reflects: "It's easy to accept that we shouldn't be dismissive of people because of their faults, but it's harder to not be inclusive of people because they're attractive. What's wrong with regarding someone's strength? The strength is not the issue, the person is the issue."

"Let Mercy Lead"

That cooing at the beginning is indeed Aidan, Beaker's son, to whom the song is addressed. (The tyke turned 1 in June.) As Rich tells it, "we were sitting around and we said, 'Hey, let's write a song for Aidan.' We started it before he was even born. And Beaker said, 'I want to write a song for him that will take him through life.' I wish we could have the same intensity about everything we write, because we spent months and months discarding really cool ideas. Beaker is not entirely satisfied with the song. But fortunately he's gonna be around to tell Aidan other things."

"Hatching of a Heart"

"The motivation was just that I had this real dreamy piano riff ... I stole the title from Thomas Morton ... It's like this book I'm reading now, Soul Making, by Alan Jones. One of things I've become interested in is: What is a soul? Does it grow, does it pre-exist us? The Bible doesn't really talk a whole lot about it. It's the whole 'born again' thing. My own experience is there in the song."

"Promenade"

The song tells of a policeman who intends to quiet a group of revelers, but who encounters so much joy that he ends up joining the celebration. "We try to make Christianity attractive," says Rich. "And that's like saying I'm

going to make the Rockies attractive. How are you going to do that? By letting them be what they are. I think nothing is more compelling than to see people who have the Spirit living in the Spirit, and not trying to advertise, just being what they are."

"Wounds of Love"

"I think everyone who allows themselves to honestly be loved is going to be wounded," muses Rich. "Your life is a gift, and out of gratitude to God you should go out there and live. And when it's all over you're gonna be pretty wounded. And I hope that you're hurt because people have loved you, not because they used you."

"Damascus Road"

Rich sings that he was "hung in the ropes of success" until God "stripped away the mask of life they had placed upon the face of death." Why that image? "That's one of the miracles of Christ - the blind can see," he says. "There are times in your life that I believe God powerfully gives you vision, and you say, 'Oh my gosh, that is not what I thought. I fact, that is the exact opposite of what I thought.'"

"Eli's Song"

The album's second baby-inspired song was co-written by Rich, fellow Ragamuffin Lee Lundgren, and Lundgren's wife Nikki, for the couples newborn daughter, Eliza. "I had written this dulcimer thing that I really liked," Rich recalls. "Nikki had said the dulcimer melody sounded kind of rough and kind of delicate, like a cowgirl and a ballerina at the same time. We put that together with a leaf to make it a three-part image." The added the rocking of Eliza's cradle to fade out the tune.

"Cry the Name"

Oops. The hard-boiled, artery-clogging Scottish eggs had just arrived, and we got so caught up that I forgot to ask Rich about this song. It's great, though. Listen for yourself. But first, pass the pepper.

"The Breaks"

One of this song's lines - "I do not know yet what I am made of, or all I may someday be" - mirrors a lyric from "Creed" on Rich's last album: "I did not

make it, no it is making me." Rich attributes both thoughts to one of his favorite authors, G.K. Chesterson. "It's kind of like the apostle Paul's thing about losing your life to find it," says Rich. "Growing up in the 60's and 70's, people said 'I'm going out to find myself.' And its (chuckle) sort of silly. My parents would say, 'How did they lose themselves?' ... And so in the process of living, and trying to be faithful to Christ but not doctrinally narrow, I'm asking that if I were to hold on to Christ, what would that be, and what would that not be? And in light of that, let me let go, oh God, in your mercy, of everything that is not you."

"Quotin' Deuteronomy to the Devil"

This folk-rockish tune came to be as Rich and Beaker were "just sitting around one day" in Rich's Wichita pad. "It was sort of a joke, actually," says Rich. "as much as I am sometimes skeptical about those preachers that yell at you all the time - like in real life, if a preacher yells at me I just leave - if you cartoon it, then I think it's interesting."

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